

THE INDUSTRY OF CLUBS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DESIGN

By: Hervey R. Lavoie

An objective, outside observer of the club industry could easily conclude that facility design – the look and functionality of the physical plant – is not important. Such an observer could see lavishly appointed, extravagantly finished and well-planned clubs that are not financially successful. This observer could also find poorly appointed, cheaply finished and badly planned clubs that are, none-the-less, massive financial successes. What about facility design in the club industry? Is it just a pointless beauty contest, or is there substance to the argument that design is an important factor in the quest for business success in the club industry?

Clearly there are major influences other than design in the formula for success in the club industry. Location, competitive pressure, operational efficiency, professional management, programming and marketing are but a few. What then is the importance of design? Why should club Owners care about it, and carry the burden of it's cost in their development planning?

If building design is to be more than a beauty contest in bricks and mortar, it must recognize the impact of these other success factors. Designers must understand their ability to enhance or diminish these factors for business success and ultimately embrace the opportunity and duty therein.

In other words, the importance of design lies in its capacity to support the true determinants of success in the club industry. The importance of design rests on the designer's acceptance of an agenda for business success. Designers must understand the club business and learn how to serve it in creative and far-sighted ways. The opportunities to do this are many. There is room for improvement in every aspect of club design. Too many designers are satisfied to indulge only their own artistic agendas. Such agendas may include the desire to impress peers, win awards, indulge aesthetic bias, avenge past artistic failures, earn the respect of mentors, etc. None of these motivators is related to the club business. This self-serving approach is rife with missed opportunities for the designers to focus their creative talents on the agenda for business success. It is easy to cite examples based on the success influences cited above.

Location: Design can mitigate the negative influence of a poor location (difficult topography, lack of views, bad neighbors, poor access, no exposure, etc.). Design can multiply the benefits of a great location (good views, plenty of space, favorable grades, great exposure, etc.).

Operations: The day-to-day routine of club operations must be understood by the designer. Design decisions can impact the number of staff required to run a club. Member/guest access control can be simplified or complicated by design/layout choices. Finish materials can be durable and easy to clean, or they can be easily damaged and hard to maintain. These are design issues.

Design image can reinforce pride of membership or erode it. This will impact member retention. Good design, with attention paid to aesthetics and style, can enrich the member experience, while poor design can impoverish it. For many members and prospective members the club they belong to is as much a part of their identity as the clothes they wear, the car they drive and the house in which they live. When design supports pride of membership, design supports business success.

Competitive Pressure: In a competitive marketplace strategic design can create the differentiation that leads to increased market share. Your competitor has a 15 lap walk/jog track? Your club can have an 8 lap track. Your competitor has crowded, low ceiling group exercise rooms? Yours can be large, glassy high-ceiling studios. Your competitor has gang showers? Yours can be individual compartments. Your competitor expects members to bring their own padlock? Your members can enjoy the convenience of keyless electronic locks. Designing with a competitive strategy in mind can create the differentiation that will not only improve your market share, but will expand the market itself.

Programming: In the area of program accommodation, design can promote flexibility and flow, create convenience and opportunity, anticipate needs and deliver value. The circulation of each user group, staff and materials through the club can be thought through and optimized to provide the best member experience. Inspired design can create synergy, the miracle through which 2+2 can equal more than 4. Synergy is what happens when your tennis players notice that you have aquatic exercise classes for aching joints. Synergy is what happens when your lap swimmers notice an old friend playing tennis, and decide to sign up for lessons. Synergy is what happens when designers pay attention to opportunities in facility design to showcase one attraction to another and arrange the fit and flow of the facility to encourage awareness and cross-utilization of all club attractions.

The economic miracle that makes the club industry possible is that an individual may enjoy affordable access to amenities, programming and attractions he or she could never afford to build and maintain as a sole user. The statistical miracle that makes the club industry possible is that all active, dues-paying members never show up at the same time.

The miracle that designers are asked to perform in this challenging industry is to work hand-in-hand with operations and programming to embrace the intelligence that exists in all parties to the club industry (owners, users, staff, suppliers, etc.) and, 18 months before the doors are open for business, to visualize and document on paper, a building that will deliver a fresh and satisfying experience for each member.

THE END

Hervey R. Lavoie is President of Ohlson Lavoie Corporation, an international Architectural firm located in Denver, Colorado and specializing in the design of athletic clubs and fitness centers. This is the first in the series of articles for Body Life, in which Mr. Lavoie will explore the importance of design in the club industry. He can be contacted at hlavoie@olc-architects.com.